

## Against the Grain

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# Pelikan's Disambiguation -- The Price of Prevarication

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# Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — The Price of Prevarication

by Michael P. Pelikan (Penn State) <mpp10@psu.edu>

*prevaricate /pri'varidkeit/ \*v. to speak or act evasively.*

The “Price of our Prevarication” is measured in decades and in millions.

We hear sometimes that libraries, and even higher education as we’ve known it, are in a fight for survival.

I’m here to assert that this survival, while necessary, will not be sufficient. We must be prepared to remake ourselves to the fullest extent needed to thrive — thrive, I say!

Our job is to grow fully into our highest and best in the emerging days of librarianship, to embrace “that which is to come” not merely with grim resignation, but with thrilling excitement.

I heard a wonderful presentation recently by a candidate for a non-librarian position in the information technology services department for a self-described Research University. This person held a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and a Master’s in Library Science. I cannot recall a candidate presentation I’ve ever enjoyed as much. Please understand: The candidate was trained in philosophy, fully qualified to be a subject librarian, yet preparing to apply those tools instead to the realm of information architecture.

What was so refreshing to me was this person’s easy, comfortable, yet utterly solid self-discipline in the use of words. Listening to the candidate make fine, non-pedantic, accessible, clear distinctions between closely-aligned-yet-not-identical ideas was like being permitted to hear **Bach** after having been subjected involuntarily to a long, long spell of elevator music.

The discipline employed in the field of Philosophy is precisely the tonic needed in a world in which words are carelessly, even purposely, misused. How many millions of dollars have our collection builders spent on Management Self-Help books that carelessly make equivalencies out of terms such as “Data,” “Information,” “Fact,” “Idea,” and “Knowledge?”

Yet try and suggest that such terms are not co-equal and you may hear a colleague reply, “Well, the difference is just semantic,” or, “This whole discussion is merely academic.”

Merely academic?

Would someone please tell me — cogently I mean — what in the bleepety-bleeping world the phrase “Knowledge Management” is supposed to be universally understood to mean? Is it sort of like Information Management, or something more like Idea Management? Is it something that Knowledge Workers do, or only their bosses?

And what ARE the Seven, Six, Eight, or Five Steps to Effective (term-d’Joure) Management? Gosh — I just internalized the Seven Steps and now suddenly there are Five! Or is it Six? What’s that you say? It’s Three? Why

did they wait to inform us of these Facts, this Knowledge, this new understanding? Maybe I’m in a **Sprint** dead zone and they can’t update my **Kindle**....

Why, in the name of all that is Platonic, do we permit this drek into our already over-taxed library physical plants, even as we ship **Mortimer J. Adler** off to the Annex because nobody seems to be reading him? We’re becoming so impoverished that we can’t even find the words to express our own needs or the needs of our institutions, or of our students — and I think we realize it, so we jump onto bandwagons, or we hesitate....

From the architecture of our Webs, to the design of our instruction, to the terms of the licensing agreements we sign, to the not-inconsequential strategic partnerships we enter into with the digital private sector, we careen along, buffeted, bouncing, white water rafting our way into the future, hanging on for dear life.

Usually we do what we do in the drive to lower thresholds, increase access, to regain a front-and-center role in the education of our students. The “elephant in the room” is that even as we double and redouble our efforts, as our costs skyrocket, to an alarming extent, the students do not hold the same appreciation of our relevance to them that we do. We keep failing to close the sale.

This has resulted in appalling contortions — as we bend over backward to accommodate a clientele that is challenged in the use of language and critical thought, ill-prepared by their education to articulate and organize their ideas at the level needed to make effective use of the incredible resources we’ve lovingly assembled for them — so we must both welcome them as they are and also raise them up, without alienating them or driving them from the room.

Just for fun, here’s the link: <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm>

This will take you to the **ACRL** Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education.

It’s not too severe, I think, to suggest that there is almost no better litmus test by which to judge our decisions and actions in the profession of librarianship in higher education beyond the extent to which they move us closer towards or further away from the achievement of these standards by our patrons.

This requires self examination — and I don’t mean merely another committee-based review of materials, curricula, signage, and so forth.

It’s really a matter of gaining genuine self-knowledge. We need an unblinking understanding of why we do the things we do: an unvarnished, intimate familiarity with the values, the needs, the insecurities, the false prizes,

through which our decisions and actions emerge as we design, build, and guide the evolution of our products and services.

Avoidance of the pain engendered by this self examination is the source of our prevarication. As such, it is the target of this episode of Antidisambiguation.

What is more painful than self examination? Well, the fulfillment of our worst fears, for one.

If we persist in tolerating counter-productive vendor tactics based upon unsustainable business models, if we permit lackluster service attitudes, ossified pedagogical methods, or self-destructive strategic decisions foisted on our beloved, irreplaceable institutions, whether in the name of conservatism and caution, or in the name of change and innovation, then our buildings may indeed become mere museums for books, whose expense to maintain won’t justify the perceived value received from them.

And I guess I’m starting to think that among our fundamental errors are that we (a) place too much stock in what the career fields out there tell us that they’re looking for in our graduates, and (b) we too narrowly define what we’re looking for in those whom we ourselves hire.

In other words, we’re beginning to gather in the consequences of educating several generations too narrowly.

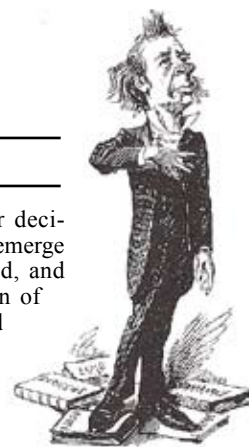
A very wise man once told me that the purpose of a higher education is not to prepare you for your first job, but to prepare you for what he called “your BIG job.”

Your “BIG job” is that certain circumstance that one day will confront you, that your handling of which will make the biggest difference, among all the other things you ever do, in determining the outcome of your life.

This is the point at which it matters a lot less what you “learned” in school than the extent to which you are prepared to continue to learn, grow, adapt, make conceptual leaps, and head in directions unforeseen by the geniuses who developed your curriculum. How ready will you be when something really unexpected happens: when the bottom falls out, external factors impinge, the whole thing implodes?

When all you’ve been given is a hammer, you’ll treat every challenge as a nail.

The thing is, it’s not merely our patrons who are members of this several-generation cohort whose educations have been overly narrow and “first career-centric.” Many of us or our colleagues came out this same pedagogical model as well.



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# Take a closer look at....

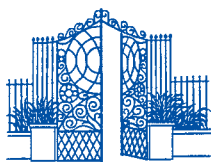
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### Pelikan's Antidisambiguation from page 14

Remember: our students didn't make the library the way it is — we did. It is we who tell them, "You want Psychology? That's not here. This is the Social Sciences Library. Psychology is in the Education and Behavioral Sciences Library. That's two floors up. Next, please...."

Honestly now: do we recognize how difficult it is becoming to convince those coming into our profession that things are the way they are for good reasons?

For that matter, have we noticed the burgeoning application of the information sciences in the world outside of the confines of the Library itself? Some of our MLIS folks are heading out of the libraries and into the larger world: some after a taste or two too many of the reception they receive at the hands of the water

buffalos, comfortable and content to chew their cud in the academy, others directly from library school. How are we going to get the best into the libraries and then keep them there?

I usually write and speak about emerging technologies. Here I have chosen instead to point to aspects of human behavior — our human behavior — that likely are impervious to influence from external factors such as emerging technologies. I assure you, in the strongest possible terms, that the most fundamental challenges we face do not involve technology. Technology is a blackboard, a piece of chalk, a lectern. The real question is; what are we going to say?

Please. What good does it do to cite primarily external factors to explain the strategic picture facing us today?

And finally, to what may we correctly point as signifiers of the seriousness with which we face the future and its challenges? 🌧

tucky. He writes about many innovative approaches to fund raising and their effort to transcend the transcription of oral history interviews to take it to new heights. **Adam Corson-Finnerty** focuses on ways to generate income in academic libraries. He talks about the importance of income-producing activities and long term business plans for sustaining new projects. **Anita Norton** writes of a way that the librarians at **Johns Hopkins University/Excelsior College** increased the use of services and resources through course

### Rumors from page 6

**Endeca search engine.** FRBRized organization of searched titles will allow libraries to see metadata for both print and electronic versions of books, including those available from the **MyiLibrary** platform. Identified orders can then be ordered directly through **Collection Manager**, or from the library's order system, based on data downloaded from **Collection Manager**. "This is a significant moment for Blackwell," stated **Andrew Hutchings**, company CEO. "Our goal has been to be a true marketplace for eBooks." **Rich Rosy**, Vice President and General Manager, **Ingram Library Solutions** said, "We're pleased to have entered this arrangement with Blackwell. Working with them significantly broadens the base of worldwide library customers who will now have access to Ingram's growing eBook collection. We welcome their partnership."

<http://digital@blackwell.com>

<http://www.talktoingram.com>

Speaking of Chicago, had a delightful glass of wine with **John Dove** <johngdove@gmail.com> of **Credo Reference** and **Mary Kay Jezzini** <mary.kay@ix.netcom.com>, one of my favorite people in the world. Did you know that **John** is a pianist which I used to be in another life. We had fun discussing a recent article in the **Wall Street Journal** (Feb. 28, 2009) ("Sound of One-Hand Playing: Ravel's challenging 'Concerto Pour la Main Gauche'" by **Benjamin Ivry**. Apparently the Austrian pianist **Paul Wittgenstein** (brother of the philosopher **Ludwig Wittgenstein**) lost an arm fighting in World War I and commissioned several pieces for the left hand only. Anyway, we also ended up talking about our first dates! Not sure what we had been drinking but it made for great conversation!

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123578269271998201.html>

And, coincidentally, noticed the interview with John in **Library Journal** ("The Concept of Credo," by **Mirela Roncevic**) which is fun to read. John's mother was a library researcher for **Encyclopaedia Britannica** of all things! Talk about synchronicity!

<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6678568.html>

Getting back to **Library Journal**, most of us know that **RBI (Reed Business Information)** has put **LJ**, **SLJ**, and **PW** up for sale in addition to 50 other titles. This happened in 2008 as well but **RBI** pulled out of the plan when they could not get the price that they wanted. Reportedly,

*continued on page 26*

### Entrepreneurship in Libraries from page 1

the inner entrepreneur in order to deliver fantastic library experiences for our users. He defines librarian entrepreneur and speaks about the connection between innovation and creativity to entrepreneurship. **Doug Boyd** focuses on the phenomenal work being undertaken at the **Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History** at the **University of Ken-**

integration into online courses. She writes about how important it is to collaborate with course developers and instructional designers. **Michael Crumpton** writes about how to turn your library "green" and to make a difference within the larger university and community context. **Jennifer Calvo** writes about how **North Carolina State University Libraries** raises the awareness of the Libraries' late night hours and services through its **Learning Commons**. 🌸